

The Empire Strikes Back

The Sudden Rise and Ongoing Challenges of Democrats for Education Reform

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Last summer, the cluster of interconnected organizations known collectively as Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) celebrated its eighth official anniversary and announced that longtime leader Joe Williams would be stepping down as executive director by the end of the year.

At the time, DFER's full-time national staff numbered about 20 and spent about \$12 million a year, according to Williams.¹ All six founding board members were still on board—a remarkable run of stability. With 13 active state chapters in addition to a federal lobbying and policy shop, the organization claimed to have helped 17 states reform teacher evaluation, 11 states include student achievement in teacher evaluation and tenure decisions, and 13 states expand charter school provisions.

“I feel good about what we did,” said Williams a few months after his departure, sounding relaxed. Typically self-deprecating, Williams explained the need for new leadership in simple terms: “I just ran out of tricks.”

During the previous eight years, especially from 2008 to 2012, DFER received enormous attention—both admiring and critical—and had been extremely active. Steven Brill captured much of its early success in his 2010 book *Class Warfare*, a generally favorable account of education reform issues and players in the 2008 election and first two years of the Obama administration. That same year, Diane Ravitch's *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* told some of the same story from a more critical perspective.

For some education reformers, DFER's intramural, Democrats-only focus had been a breath of fresh air. Its explicitly political focus—as opposed to policy or practice—was a welcome change.

Some believed that the organization's influence during that period had been substantial: “There's no doubt that the Democratic Party has moved significantly more towards the reform side, even with the turn back [away from some of DFER's ideas] now,” said Drew University's Patrick McGuinn in an early 2016 interview. DFER is “not the only reason but [it] has played a big role,” according to McGuinn, who penned a 2012 look at DFER's policy leadership.²

Others believed that DFER had done little or had even been a destructive force within the Democratic Party. “I met the folks at DFER through John Petri at Gotham Capital,” recalled Daniel Leeds, a DC businessman and philanthropist who had helped found the League of Education Voters and who regularly convened a broad group of education funders. “I didn't see how [their approach] was going to drive education attainment forward.”³

Taking the middle view were those who, while generally supportive of DFER’s aims, wondered why it hadn’t done more with the amazing luck and momentum that it had enjoyed. DFER “didn’t create a broad movement among Democratic lawmakers around revamping how schools work,” said former Michigan lawmaker Tim Melton, who moved over to work for StudentsFirst, a school reform advocacy group that recently merged with 50CAN.

After Williams’ departure, the question was whether DFER was “out of tricks,” too. Could DFER—founded to create a “safe place” for pro-charter, reform-oriented Democratic politicians to make much-needed changes to the education system—find ways to deepen and expand its successes without such a close ally in the White House as it had enjoyed during the Obama administration? Could DFER find new ways to influence the political process at the state and local levels, as it had done for a time federally?

DFER’S Accomplishments

The main question of this case study is to consider DFER’s influence and impact from 2008 to 2016. Some other key questions include:

- How did DFER’s influence rise or fall during that time—and why?
- What strategies and tactics did DFER use to influence the political process, and which ones worked better than others?
- Did DFER—described in one AFT document as “an education privatization group started by hedge fund managers”—help to destabilize or enlarge the Democratic Party?

What seems clear is that DFER emerged in the right place at the right time—and backed the right horses, including Barack Obama and Cory Booker. In remarkably short order, DFER and its allies became among the only folks that Obama could turn to for advice on how to fulfil his promise as a reform-minded Democratic president. Then, when Race to the Top (RTTT) turned into a competition among states for scarce new federal education dollars, DFER basically went from not existing to helping shape federal policy in two years flat.

But even as DFER and its allies enjoyed incredible successes, its reputation for influence exceeded its real-world abilities, and the cracks in the model were already forming. The 2010 rise of the Tea Party, the push to implement both new standards and teacher evaluations at roughly the same time, and the emergence of a powerful new social justice movement all helped put DFER and its school reform allies in direct conflict with the teachers unions and a growing number of Democrats who identified as progressive or liberal.

The backlash against “corporate reform” nationally and in places like Newark would surprise DFER and its allies with its power and suddenness. They found their ideas—such as common standards for all children—used as a proxy to fight back against them.

By the time forces aligned to roll back the federal education law known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the unions and conservatives were teamed up on their own. DFER and its allies, used to being at the center of everything, were left somewhat to the side.

Even under new leadership, it’s hard to predict what happens to DFER in a post-Obama environment. DFER and its allies will need to rebrand themselves to make clear that they are trying to change attitudes and address broader issues rather than merely looking to pass another teacher evaluation bill. The next

White House occupant isn't likely to be a close ally. The action is going to be in the states. "They've never really existed without Obama," said one close observer who didn't want to be named. "That's a question looming out there for them."

What Is DFER and Why Was It Needed?

First conceived around 2005, DFER didn't really launch until June 2007, when it held a public event and established an online presence. While generally referred to by a single name, DFER grew to become several related organizations including a traditional nonprofit 501(c)(3) called Education Reform Now (ERN), a 501(c)(4) known as ERN Action, and the eponymous political action committee (DFER). In addition to campaign fundraising and explicitly political efforts, DFER's activities included policy development, state-level advocacy, and congressional lobbying such as during the recent renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

DFER's efforts generated roughly \$65 million over eight years, according to Williams.⁴ The Broad and Walton Foundations were among its largest national funders. By far the majority of its revenues was for policy and advocacy work through ERN and ERN Advocacy, rather than the explicit campaign work of the DFER PAC. Political giving made up only about \$1.5 million of DFER's annual budget.⁵

Overall, DFER and its allies weren't able to keep up with the teachers unions when it came to campaign fundraising. The teachers unions were "printing money and DFER is doing cocktail parties," said Amy Wilkins about the union-DFER gap. Teachers unions received most of their funding from monthly member dues, rather than election cycle donations from individual donors. The NEA established a special fund to deal with state ballot issues that reached more than \$50 million, according to former NEA Executive Director John Wilson. The Massachusetts teachers recently established a \$9 million fund to fight against charter school expansion. The funding gap would not be the case in all states in all years, however. DFER and its allies outspent the teachers unions in New York and Colorado in some years.

Rather than trying to create cookie-cutter franchises that looked the same from state to state, DFER created state chapters that could be independent (and had to raise large portions of their own money). The benefits of having a more organic approach had a huge upside in terms of letting local DFER staffers build on their existing relationships and develop authentic priorities rather than sticking to a rigid national list of positions. The downside was that some of DFER's picks to run state chapters didn't know how to run a nonprofit and floundered. And some state directors like California's Gloria Romero wanted to go further than DFER felt comfortable.⁶ But if state chapters could overcome those early hurdles, they could operate effectively, fending off claims that they were governed by outsiders.

DFER wasn't the first or only national education reform advocacy organization of its kind. Others included the Education Equality Project, which Williams was also involved in launching, and the Education in 2008 advocacy campaign, funded by the Gates and Broad foundations to bring attention to education issues in the 2008 presidential election. But it was the first major advocacy organization to have a political action committee along with 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) wings.⁷

It may be difficult to remember at this point, but for many years few education organizations other than teachers unions and education associations (superintendents, math teachers, and the like) were active players on the national scene. Democratic political officials and organizations such as the Democratic

National Committee (DNC) and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee tended to leave their education policy work to these groups, who worked closely with congressional committee leaders.

This was especially true with federal education policy. “Everyone depended on the unions to work the Hill,” said longtime education advocate Amy Wilkins, who was surprised to be one of the only nonlabor, non-association people lobbying the Hill on education issues for the Education Trust during the early 1990s. Democrats had “outsourced our brains.”⁸

Although few remember it now, Williams was not the first person to head DFER. It was Wilkins who was first approached for the job. What appealed to DFER about Wilkins was that she was a Washington insider who knew how to get things done in Congress. What appealed to Wilkins about the effort was that it was a new approach. And she could do it from Washington, where she lived.

However, the New York City–based founding board members weren’t particularly knowledgeable about the political process. They had some money—not that much compared with the unions they were going to battle—and a new idea. But they didn’t understand the relationship between campaign contributions and political action, and were sometimes impatient and undisciplined, according to Wilkins and others.

For her part, Wilkins was inexperienced in some of the campaign laws that governed contributions to candidates, was not conversant in the impatience that characterizes Wall Street philanthropy, and had not headed this kind of an organization before. The relationship between Wilkins and the DFER founders quickly unraveled. She returned to the Education Trust, and DFER founders brought in Williams.

A former education journalist, Williams had written a book about education and politics and come to much the same conclusion as others. “New entrants don’t appreciate how little room there was in Democratic circles to be talking about much more than more money and smaller class sizes,” reminded Williams. “Everything else—you didn’t talk about it.”

Mr. Friendly and Mr. Gruff

In the years after it was launched, DFER quickly became arguably one of the best-known education reform advocacy efforts in the nation. To a large extent, Williams seemed to have been instrumental in DFER’s rise. “If one person is at the center of this close-knit nexus of Wall Street and education reform interests, it is Joe Williams,” noted Dana Goldstein in a 2009 *Nation* article.⁹

Slender and short-haired, Williams generally avoided heated public rhetoric. He usually came off as amiable and informal, rather than fast-talking or pretentious. Williams “wasn’t like most other arrogant, asshole education reform guys,” agreed Van Schoales, who helped DFER launch its Colorado chapter and worked for DFER from 2009 through 2011. “Everybody loves Joe,” said Devin Boyle, a communications staffer who worked for DFER from 2010 to 2014.

Williams’ mild-mannered approach was something that the organization tried to emulate. “We try not to be the bomb throwers,” said DFER cofounder Whitney Tilson. “Our ethos is to be very strong on issues but not to personalize them.”

This “nice guy” approach was at least occasionally undercut by Tilson’s exuberant claims and the behavior of Williams’ gruff policy director, Charles Barone. Williams described Barone as “an incredible partner” in whom he found a real ally. “We were both pointed in the same direction all the time,” said

Williams about the former George Miller (D-CA) education staffer. “It was one of those work relationships where you can finish each other’s sentences.” A tough-talking guy with a raspy voice and a Mark Ruffalo–like intensity, longtime Democratic staffer Barone had been radicalized by repeated run-ins with and perceived betrayals by the teachers unions during his years on the Hill.¹⁰

Unlike Williams, Barone tended toward urgent rhetoric that drew bright lines between allies and opponents. “Those who resist the school reform movement are going to find they are on the wrong side of history,” wrote Barone in the summer of 2009 on his now-defunct blog, *Swift and Changeable*. “They may affect the pace of reform, but not its inexorable direction. They must decide whether they will participate, or continue to be further marginalized.”¹¹

The 2008 DNC Convention and Early Obama Endorsement

One of Williams’ first duties was to gain the trust of his powerful, impulsive board members and herd them into some sort of alignment with his own vision. Another was to get DFER recognized by the political establishment—most notably the DNC. Toward that end, DFER organized an event just before the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Colorado, the largest gathering of Democratic officials, supporters, and operatives, held every four years.

The DFER convention event was “full of anti-union rhetoric, even as teachers’ union members remain[ed] among the most loyal of Democratic constituencies,” according to journalist Dana Goldstein.¹² While it received little publicity at the time, the event would eventually be “recognized as the start of a shift in how the party handles education,” as the *Los Angeles Times*’ Joy Resmovits would note several years later.¹³

A key early moment for DFER was supporting then-underdog US Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) against Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) for the Democratic nomination for president. DFER’s early support for Obama and the up-and-coming Cory Booker (for mayor of Newark and then US Senator for New Jersey) would prove to be tremendously helpful to its progress. “Never in our wildest dreams did we imagine that one would be president and the other a member of the U.S. Senate,” said Tilson, who described the early endorsement of the eventual president as “by far, the single most important thing DFER has ever done.”

The move gave DFER the aura of being politically savvy and gave it an ally in the White House for the next eight years. “Then the unions completely played into our hands by going all in with Hillary,” said Tilson. “When [Obama] won, he owed them nothing. . . . It was a dream come true.”¹⁴

Another small, but important early decision was to name the organization Democrats for Education Reform. The association with “reform” would become more problematic over time as the word became more controversial. But the constant reminder that these were Democrats who were pushing for changes turned out to be a core part of the organization’s appeal—and a bit of insulation against criticism that the group’s efforts were hostile or anti-Democratic. It also didn’t hurt that people sometimes initially thought that DFER was a part of the national Democratic Party.

Waking Up the Democratic Party to Education Reform

It was little more than dumb luck that DFER’s decision to support Obama worked out. DFER didn’t give him enough money to make a difference in the election, and if Clinton had prevailed, its founders could just as

easily have spent the next eight years on the outside with their noses pressed to the glass. Instead, after a brief flirtation with appointing Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond to a top position in his new administration—a possibility DFER worked hard to fend off—Obama appointed pro-reform Chicago schools superintendent Arne Duncan to head the USDE and made school reform a small but key part of the stimulus bill of 2009.

DFER and its allies badmouthed Darling-Hammond as much as they could get away with, raising questions about her research and accomplishments. Then, in what would become one of DFER's most frequently retold early accomplishments, Williams “leaked” a memo addressed to the Obama transition team outlining both policy ideas and potential appointees for various White House and cabinet department positions. In it, DFER put forth the notion that NYC Chancellor Joel Klein might be too controversial for education secretary but Chicago's Arne Duncan might be a good choice.

Whether or not DFER deserved all the credit for the Duncan nomination was debatable. He and Obama had overlapped in Chicago, visited schools together, and played pickup basketball together. Either way, “the reformers were suddenly key players [at the national level],” wrote New America's Conor Williams. Under Obama, “things that reformers had been pushing city-by-city . . . became national priorities.”⁵

Race to the Top

While others were skeptical that just \$5 billion in federal education funding could make a big difference, DFER was one of the first groups to be bullish about 2009's Race to the Top state grant competition. The \$5 billion program within the much larger 2009 Stimulus Bill, RTTT was set up as a competitive grant program that encouraged states to make a series of changes and promises in order to win federal funding.

Policy head Barone was not a fan of competitive grants or of unlimited increases in charter schools. But Obama allies including DFER talked up the initiative at every possible opportunity, and like cash-strapped Lotto players, states desperate for a chance at additional funding stumbled over themselves to apply. Unlimited numbers of charter schools? Sure. Higher standards and harder tests for kids? No problem. Evaluate teachers in part through student test scores? Why not?

At the time, DFER's only big chapters were in New York and Colorado. So DFER focused on those states, helping state officials draft and then revise their applications and working with legislators to do things such as removing charter caps and implementing a student achievement component in teacher evaluations. It paid for canvassers and even television ads in New York, telling voters that the state would lose \$200 million if it didn't pass an education reform package. It also helped bolster the Obama administration's efforts to make the review process selective and rigorous, helping states develop strong applications and pushing for a meaningful review process.

Book author Brill described RTTT as a “rocket boost” for the reform agenda. Thirty-four states would make “important changes in their education laws or regulations” in response to RTTT.¹⁶

However, DFER wasn't really as invested in the Common Core state standards that were also included in RTTT, and Barone would later describe the pushback against new standards and tests as completely predictable and ideally avoided altogether. The compromise inclusion of both teacher evaluation reform—a DFER priority—and the Common Core state standards—a Gates and Broad priority—proved to be especially problematic.¹⁷

“Pushing teacher evaluation at the same time as Common Core was a bad idea,” said Williams. The new Common Core standards and tests directly affected schools and students. Revamping the way teachers are evaluated (and to some extent paid) directly affected teachers. Each was scheduled to take effect at about the same time. “Perhaps it would have been better if one [policy priority] had won and the other lost.”

For a time, before new tests and teacher evaluation systems were implemented, both teachers unions supported the Common Core state standards. That would change, however, and the shift would catch DFER and its allies in the Obama administration woefully unprepared.

Along the way, some of the laws passed in the heyday of 2009–11 would end up not panning out. The Colorado changes to teacher evaluation, among other things, ended up being “a huge distraction that has made it hard to do other things,” according to Schoales—and “hadn’t moved the needle on student achievement.”

Calling on states to remove limits on charter school caps—without strong quality or diversity requirements—was another RTTT provision that came back to hurt DFER. Charter school issues tended to dominate the DFER agenda in part because charter schools, with their state associations and lists of board members, were a convenient fundraising resource for DFER and its state chapters. There was no broader list of pro-reform teachers, parents, or taxpayers that DFER could tap. However, the focus on charter school expansion was especially antagonistic toward teachers unions and could be limiting. “They didn’t seem to feel that there was any other reform strategies that could possibly be effective,” said Wilkins. “Sometimes you need a wrench; sometimes you need a screwdriver.”

Electoral Work

Other than being an early Obama supporter and helping shape and promote his national education agenda, DFER’s other main job was raising money and supporting Democratic candidates and incumbents who were in favor of school accountability and high-quality charter schools.

First and foremost, DFER helped defend its champions in Congress. Congressman George Miller (D-CA) supported most of the teachers’ issues outside of education (labor, pensions, and health care) and was respected enough that nobody ever tried to take him out for his heretical ideas about schools, according to Williams. “He was so good on so many other issues that are important to them,” said Williams. They could live with his education agenda as long as he was with them on so much else. “Like Obama.”¹⁸

Elected mayor of Newark and then to the US Senate, Booker’s story paralleled Obama’s in some important ways. Both pro-reform Democrats on the rise who were supported by DFER and opposed by the teachers unions, they pushed through education plans (One Newark and RTTT) that generated enormous attention and some important changes but eventually became political liabilities.¹⁹

DFER was also an early supporter of New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, who wasn’t known for being active on education issues or even being pro-reform. Earlier on, as attorney general, Cuomo had opposed limits on the use of seniority for hiring and firing teachers. But Williams convinced reform purists and DFER donors that the relationship might prove fruitful over time. Cuomo would end up being a key ally on school reform when NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg was succeeded by reform critic Bill de Blasio. DFER also helped Connecticut’s Dannel Malloy get reelected and helped pass Washington State’s charter school referendum, which is currently under judicial review.

Along the way, DFER also lost a number of high-profile mayoral campaigns, including Adrien Fenty’s 2010 reelection effort in DC, John Connelly’s 2014 campaign in Boston, and Shavar Jeffries’ 2014 run for office in Newark.²⁰ “Some things just take a certain amount of time,” said Tilson, who also noted the current mayors of DC and Newark who replaced DFER favorites were generally continuing the reform approaches initiated by their predecessors and were working with pro-reform school heads. Others noted that, by the time the 2014 Boston race was over, winner Marty Walsh was saying many of the same things that his DFER-supported rival John Connelly was advocating. Maybe DFER was winning even when its candidates lost?

Escalating Conflicts, 2010–2012

Despite its name and being almost entirely staffed by Democrats, DFER was regularly assailed from the left as being anti-union, corporate, and Democratic in name only. As its prominence grew, conflicts arose, and attempts to discredit the organization’s party loyalties and candidates ramped up.

Until 2010, differences between DFER and its allies and school reform opponents weren’t “as vitriolic or stark” as they would soon become, remembers Hari Sevugan, a former DNC spokesperson who had also worked for StudentsFirst. Making matters even more contentious, DFER and the unions started funding runs at each other’s incumbent officeholders.

For a time, DFER had stuck to open races, even during the 2010 fight for mayor of Washington, DC, when the unions backed Gray. “The language wasn’t the same sort of vitriol you would see a little later,” according to Sevugan. But “you could see where the cleavages were coming.”

Then DFER ran Bill Ferguson for the Maryland legislature against a longtime Democratic incumbent and would later run Marshall Tuck against incumbent Tom Torlakson for California state superintendent. In 2013, DFER would also issue its first-ever report cards on union-backed Los Angeles school board candidates Monica Garcia and Steve Zimmer. The AFT opposed DFER-backed Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel in 2012, which helped force Emanuel into a runoff.²¹

Clearly, the gloves were coming off.

There were a series of other offenses, small and large. DFER accepted \$1 million from Rupert Murdoch and nearly \$6 million from the Walton Family Foundation since 2010, breaking a pledge not to take Walmart money, according to the AFT.²² DFER helped fund ads that the union perceived as attacking the Chicago Teachers Union in the run-up to the teachers strike of 2012. DFER donated \$25,000 in leftover funding to the pro-voucher, pro-Scott Walker American Federation for Children in 2010, according to a 2014 AFT flyer.²³

Perhaps the turning point was the aftermath of the 2010 Tea Party wave of conservatism that swept the nation, focusing most centrally on Scott Walker in Wisconsin and his efforts to roll back public employee bargaining rights. On one hand, the rise of the Tea Party and conservative Republicans “almost made DFER irrelevant, because Republicans were carrying the water,” said the NEA’s Wilson about that time. “We were fighting the Scott Walkers and Chris Christies of the world. We had a much bigger enemy than them.”

According to AEI education guru Rick Hess and others, DFER agreed with many of the arguments behind Walker’s Act 10, but hypocritically attacked him for taking action on them. According to others within the labor movement, DFER remained silent as loyal Democratic workers were being disempowered, and spoke

up too late and too mildly. “[DFER wasn’t] responsible for what was happening,” noted a labor insider. “But they weren’t team players, either.” It seemed to some Democratic loyalists that DFER was more about pushing reform than building the Democratic Party.

The Wisconsin situation was particularly frustrating for the Education Trust’s Wilkins, the founding executive director, who thought that DFER had fumbled a clear opportunity to take a strong position but was powerless to help:

If you’re going to play politics for real, you’ve got to be ready for situations like this. It seems to me the easiest thing to do would be to have somebody from DFER stand up and say, ‘Who on either side of this debate has mentioned the interests of students?’ If you’re going to play in this space, it can’t always be puppies and ponies.²⁴

Making Reformers Better Democrats (and Vice Versa)

At every opportunity, Williams tried to make clear that neither he nor DFER were anti-union. “It’s not about turning your back on the union,” said Williams in a phone interview. DFER and its allies just wanted to “let there be a debate and acknowledge other people who care [besides the union].”

But he was increasingly aware that he and his allies were perceived as anti-union. In a 2011 National Public Radio interview, Williams admitted that “the notion that education reform could get wrapped up so closely with attempts to eliminate collective bargaining has made it very difficult to have this conversation all over the country.”²⁵

DFER said it was trying to make Democrats better (more courageous) advocates for changes to schools, while trying to be more careful not to hurt the working families who were a core part of the Democratic umbrella. Making reformers better Democrats meant warning funders away from approaches that were “designed primarily to undermine unions or collective bargaining,” according to Barone. Making Democrats better reformers meant keeping them “on the side of expanding public education opportunities for low-income and minority students.”

The distinction seemed to have been lost on organized labor. DFER allies in the Wisconsin statehouse were all wiped out in the aftermath of the Walker recall attempts, according to Williams.

2012 Reelection Campaign

Hosted by DFER, a 2012 DNC convention education panel in Charlotte, North Carolina, included tales of conflict and cooperation from elected officials including Colorado State Senator Michael Johnston, New Jersey State Senator Teresa Ruiz, North Carolina State Representative Marcus Brandon, and Ohio State Senator Nina Turner. But union presidents Randi Weingarten and Dennis Van Roekel also appeared on panels. “DFER sure has come a long way,” crowed Tilson.

For Williams, another “made it” moment happened a few weeks later, after Obama won reelection. The NEA’s executive director John Stocks was there, along with the AFT, the Schott Foundation, Senator Michael Bennet’s (D-CO) campaign manager Craig Hughes, and White House Domestic Policy Council education guru Roberto Rodriguez. “The idea was we’ve got to get the Democratic Party united on education,” recalled Williams.

Leeds, the host, had set up the event with “the hope of seeing if there was a way forward.” Leeds was among those who thought that the contentious relationship between DFER and the teachers unions was getting bad for the Democratic Party. In Leeds’ view, DFER was vilifying and attacking unions in ways that weren’t productive or fair. “I come from the business world. I never blame the employees. Ultimately it’s management’s fault. They provide the leadership. They sign the agreements.”

But when one of the participants spoke up about the “war on education,” seeming to blame DFER for causing a rift in the party, Obama pollster Joel Benenson stood up and told the group that “the only people who think there’s a war on education are in this room,” remembered Williams.

Indeed, in relatively short order, DFER seemed to have become a solid part of the Democratic Party. Democratic candidates accepted DFER contributions, attended DFER events, and took meetings with DFER supporters. The DNC even sent reform leader Arne Duncan out to help with party fundraising, according to Williams. DFER ally and US Senator Michael Bennet was put in charge of fundraising for the Democratic Senate Campaign, according to Tilson.

And DFER and the teachers unions weren’t always on opposite sides of things, noted Goldstein in 2012, describing reform allies’ “productive, if at times very strained, relationships with teachers’ unions.” A September 2012 *Education Week* article described “a handful of state lawmakers who spoke about their efforts to press for policies—including charter schools, and performance-based teacher pay and evaluation—that were once anathema to their party, and still are in some quarters.”²⁶

“Not one dollar of support has ever gone from DFER to a Republican candidate, which is more than many of those who disagree with us can say,” said Shavar Jeffries, who would take over DFER in 2015.

Outmaneuvered

While Tilson and Williams felt validated, battles between DFER and the NEA and AFT would soon get more heated—and more expensive.

In 2014, Barone penned a column rounding up examples of the organization’s longtime support of unions and collective bargaining. “That’s right where we’ve always been,” he claimed. But the fact that such a column was necessary suggested that not everybody was so sure.

And by August 2014, *EdWeek* was reporting that advocacy groups were being buffeted by leadership changes and shifting political winds: “These groups, which have grown in prominence in a number of states, particularly since 2008, are dealing with pushback from traditional education interest groups,” noted *EdWeek*, citing “complex political and policy challenges in states.”²⁷

Meanwhile, the rhetoric used against them was increasingly cutting. “I remember Randi [Weingarten, head of the AFT] telling me at a breakfast that they’d poll tested the phrase ‘corporate reform’ and found that it resonated deeply,” said Williams.

The charge was technically incorrect—they were Wall Street hedge fund guys, not Fortune 100 types—but not too far off the mark. In the aftermath of the Great Recession, the union “couldn’t lose if they reduced the reform wing to corporate robot status,” according to Williams.

DFER leaders were also overwhelmingly white, male, and moneyed. So if “corporate reformer” didn’t work as a way to dismiss DFER, “rich white guys” did.

Then came the policy shifts from the unions. During the early years, the AFT and NEA had signaled support for the Common Core state standards and other elements of RTTT. The two unions helped train teachers to get ready for the new standards and said supportive things about them. But that support would not last. “It seemed like they signed on to do this [Common Core development] three years ago, banging the door down saying they needed to be part of it, and then little by little they’ve peeled off,” complained Barone.²⁸ The union version was that the idea behind the Common Core had been betrayed in its development and implementation.

Shifting their position on Common Core and related efforts was both “an incredibly cynical play” by the unions, according to Williams, and a brilliant insight. “Opposing Common Core became this gigantic organizing tool.” Criticizing the Common Core put the unions back on offense and united anti-testing suburban communities with conservatives,” he said. “Anything that they didn’t like was because of the Common Core, including teacher evaluation,” said Williams. “They tied it all up in a bow.” DFER wasn’t alone in being slow to see the coming storm. “Everyone was slow on the Common Core pushback,” said Third Way’s Lanae Erickson Hatalsky.

Diminished but Still Powerful

As the Obama era ended and a new era loomed, there was the sense that school reform ideas—and DFER’s influence over Democratic candidates—were already on the decline.

A March 2015 *New York Times* article described 2016 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton as being “caught between dueling forces” on education, where “the terrain on education standards has shifted markedly, with deep new fissures in the Democratic Party.”

DFER continued to assert its support for teachers unions. “If collective bargaining were the obstacle to better public education, Wisconsin’s Republican Governor Scott Walker would be presiding over the highest-performing education system in the country,” wrote Barone in a May 2015 commentary.²⁹

But then in November, longtime charter school supporter Clinton walked back some of her support. Charter schools “don’t take the hardest-to-teach kids, or, if they do, they don’t keep them,” said Clinton.³⁰ Campaign advisor Ann O’Leary walked the statement back a couple of days later.³¹ But the rift was clear, and the damage done.

To critics, DFER seemed isolated, hollowed-out, and narrowed down to little more than a pro-charter PAC. What had started out as a three-dimensional effort was now more two-dimensional, getting into the press and funding pro-charter campaigns but lacking any real membership base. In the meantime, the NEA and AFT had evolved and were addressing systemic issues and school quality, said DFER critics.

DFER still had some oomph. While less prominent than its fundraising and political work, policy development and federal lobbying efforts led by Barone and Dannenberg could be enormously helpful and effective, according to the Third Way’s Erickson Hatalsky. This was especially true during the debate over the revamp of NCLB, when reform groups worried that annual state testing and other accountability measures would be removed from federal statute.

Being a Democratic PAC got DFER “a different level of access,” according to Erickson Hatalsky. Think tanks and associations “can come up with delightful policy arguments and polling up the wazoo, but in politics money talks.”

During the debate over revamping NCLB, the NEA and AFT were pushing members hard on a number of accountability-related issues, and threatened with loss of funding and endorsements. However, DFER and others were able to make both an intellectual and a pragmatic case against removing annual testing and subgroup accountability, for example. Most notably, DFER and its allies were able to convince all but three Democratic senators to sign onto an accountability amendment despite NEA threats to score it against them (and possibly run challengers against them in the future).

During the consideration of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a longtime DFER friend Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) emerged as one of DFER’s champions. “Every Democrat but three voted for [the Murphy amendment],” said Barone. “That to me is not losing. The amendment lost, but the longer term campaign is succeeding.” Looked at over the long haul, Barone saw things as steadily moving in the direction of success. “This has all moved in the same direction. Bobby Scott didn’t support testing in the late 1990s but was a champion in 2015.”

Not everyone would agree with the DFER assessment of the ESSA passage. “I would say it was a union victory,” said Leeds, describing the process as work done between the unions and the Republican Party. “The things the unions didn’t want—like test-score based accountability—aren’t in it. They gutted those parts.”

Perhaps Williams put it most accurately: DFER and its allies couldn’t move their own agenda and were in retreat in terms of the public narrative, but they could still block things when they needed to. “We still have votes,” said Williams. The unions were in much the same place, according to Williams. “Neither side can advance.”

Changing Scope and Breadth

The 2015 departure of Williams was supposed to change all that. As reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, the naming of Shavar Jeffries to replace him “comes as the self-titled education reform movement tries to look more like the children it aims to uplift.”³² Now headed by a relatively young African American lawyer (and onetime Newark mayoral candidate), DFER—like many other reform groups and funders—seems to be at a clear inflection point.³³

The “new” DFER that Jeffries hoped to see was one that burrowed itself deeper into the political and bureaucratic bones of the Democratic Party than any purely electoral or campaign strategy could hope to achieve. “The election is just one piece, the end of a broader thing,” said Jeffries, describing a vision for comprehensive, ongoing infiltration of the Democratic Party from local party official appointments to legislative implementation. “What we want to explore is the infrastructure of the party,” he said. “We want to be a permanent presence within the Democratic Party. . . . Wherever the Party is, that’s where we want to be.”

Candidates might not win or lose races based on their education positions, but many open-seat races were uncontested, and it would make a big difference if the Democratic operatives who put together the original lists of candidates were friendly to school reform. This approach seemed like a good idea to many of those who had worked with DFER in the past. “Nobody [in politics] comes up with education reform as their

bread and butter that got them there,” said former StudentsFirst staffer Eric Lerum, now at America Succeeds. DFER and its allies need “to go back to where [candidates] start—school board, county board, state legislator—and stay with them as they pursue higher office. That’s how every other constituency does it.”

It wasn’t clear if changes in leadership and strategy would be enough, however, without some adjustments to the organization’s priorities. DFER and its allies still weren’t pushing actively for a larger investment in education or defending schools against cuts. Nor was DFER focusing very much time or energy pushing for immigration reform, railing against income inequality, or championing racial integration, a long-dormant issue that was returning to the popular debate.³⁴

However sympathetic he might have been, Williams hadn’t been sure how to get involved in these issues without unsettling his donors and board. DFER staff and critics might wonder why he wasn’t going to Ferguson to join the protest, but there were donor calls to make and only so much time in the day. “There was a lot of pressure to stay focused” from board members and donors who didn’t want DFER to wander or waste time or money, remembered Williams. DFER didn’t want to get caught up in the debate about the school-to-prison pipeline, restorative justice programs, and systemic racism. But it didn’t want the debate to pass it by, either.

DFER and its allies also needed to broaden their base of support. If he could go back in time, Williams said he would rely less heavily on the rich Democratic donors storyline and focused instead on mobilizing do-gooder Democrats who wanted to take action. Attempting to build a culture of small-donor giving along the lines of Emily’s List or Gabby Giffords’ \$8 million per year Americans for Responsible Solutions, DFER launched the DFER list and other efforts, but never figured out how to do it. “We would love to be like Emily’s List, but there are just not enough people who care enough about education to give \$10 a month,” said Williams.

DFER also needed to come up with a new generation of policy ideas that worked for Democrats for whom market-based ideas, choice, and vouchers weren’t going to be persuasive. DFER and others needed to frame their ideas differently “within the context of progressive values,” said Erickson Hatalsky.

This was something that Barone was eager to do. Candidates “want politically viable policies. We can patch them into that.” And the process may already have begun. In early May, DFER’s policy shop released a report showing that kids from more affluent suburban districts were taking remedial classes in college.³⁵

So far in 2016, DFER has not endorsed any Democratic presidential candidate, released any fundraising information about its efforts on behalf of the DNC, or announced any change in its focus on charters and accountability. Through op-eds and other formats, Jeffries has been attempting to keep the Democratic candidates’ feet to the fire on school choice and accountability efforts. Just this week, Jeffries railed against changes in the Democratic Party platform limiting support to certain kinds of charters (among other things).

In the meantime, DFER has to be vigilant to protect its champions. US Senator Bennet is coming up for reelection in November 2016, and the 2017 governor’s race in New Jersey (an office currently held by Republican Chris Christie) is looming.

What is next for Colorado State Senator Michael Johnston is another big question. The DFER favorite is being termed out of his current office, but is unsure whether to run for another state office or do something related to Congress.

Emily’s List—or Log Cabin Republicans?

When it was first launched, DFER seemed most comparable to Emily’s List, the advocacy group set up to recruit and support pro-choice politicians with a large network of regular donors. But a better comparison might be the Log Cabin Republicans, a group that seeks to work within the existing Republican Party structure to build tolerance and support for issues affecting gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, and queer people.

It was Log Cabin Republicans that came to mind when Van Schoales first heard about DFER way back in 2008. Long active in education reform in Colorado, Schoales said he’d often felt like “the gay guy at the party [where everyone else] didn’t want to have anything to do with me.”

It might be a long time before the Democratic Party will support the education version of same-sex marriage, however. DFER and its allies “have lost ground over the last eight years, not gained—and that’s with Barack Obama in the White House,” said former StudentsFirst policy guru Eric Lerum in early 2016, pointing to the absence of Democratically controlled states such as Connecticut, New Jersey, or California in which DFER had reached a tipping point. “At the state level my sense is that it’s not any better or easier.”

And the organization is still being hit hard in the liberal media. A May 2016 piece in *American Prospect* described DFER as “a network of education advocacy groups, heavily backed by hedge fund investors, [that] has turned its political attention to the local level, with aspirations to stock school boards—from Indianapolis and Minneapolis to Denver and Los Angeles—with allies.”³⁶

Realistically speaking, the extraordinary successes of 2008–12 were unlikely to be repeated on any kind of a regular basis, according to Barone. “That’s not something that happens every year or two,” he noted. And, just like in the movies, when the insurgents have some early, unexpected successes, they face inevitable pushback from their more established opponents. “The empire strikes back,” says Barone. “That’s what happens.”

Notes

1. Disclosure: Joe Williams was kind enough to blurb my 2011 book about Locke High School, and we have had the occasional beer.
2. Patrick McGuinn, “Fight Club,” *Education Next*, Summer 2012, <http://educationnext.org/fight-club/>.
3. Leeds ended up not donating to the organization, although he would eventually try—unsuccessfully—to mend fences between DFER and the teachers unions when things got particularly acrimonious after the 2012 reelection campaign.
4. Phone interview, November 2016.
5. DFER state chapters were set up to do some of their own fundraising, and some of DFER’s stronger states—Colorado and Massachusetts—regularly raised a million dollars a year on their own. It was a push to get some state directors to do some of their own fundraising, however. They weren’t independent nonprofits. They didn’t have their own boards.

6. California chapter head Romero worked with conservative Republicans on what the AFT described as “the most anti-public education and anti-union referendums in California’s history [against Prop 30 and for Prop 32].” The chapter would be relaunched by Green Dot founder Steve Barr in 2015.

7. Alexander Russo, “The Successful Failure of ED in ’08,” American Enterprise Institute, June 20, 2012, <http://www.aei.org/publication/the-successful-failure-of-ed-in-08/>.

8. Alexander Russo, “Left Out of No Child Left Behind: Teach for America’s Outsized Influence on Alternative Certification,” American Enterprise Institute, October 2012, <https://www.aei.org/publication/left-out-of-no-child-left-behind-teach-for-americas-outsized-influence-on-alternative-certification/>.

9. Dana Goldstein, “The Selling of School Reform,” *Nation*, May 27, 2009, <http://www.thenation.com/article/selling-school-reform/>.

10. “The NEA will always goldilocks you,” as Barone was quoted in a 2011 *Huffington Post* article about a proposed Senator Harkin rewrite of NCLB that the union was opposing.

11. It wasn’t just publicly that Barone could be, well, rough. The Third Way’s Lanae Erickson Hatalsky recalled first hearing about DFER in the aftermath of a 2010 think tank report on middle-class schools that had led Barone to call and lambaste its author—followed by a feather-smoothing call from Williams. “Charlie is sometimes a little more gruff than people want him to be,” said Erickson Hatalsky, the centrist think tank’s vice president for social policy and politics.

12. Dana Goldstein, “The Democratic Education Divide,” *American Prospect*, August 27, 2008, <http://prospect.org/article/democratic-education-divide>.

13. Joy Resmovits, “The New Face of Democrats Who Support Education Reform,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/local/education/community/la-me-edu-shavar-jeffries-takes-over-democrats-for-education-reform-20150902-story.html>.

14. Unlike in 2015, when the NEA and AFT would endorse Clinton early in the process, the NEA was unable to provide an early endorsement in 2008, which, according to Wilson, made the Obama campaign extremely impatient.

15. There were, however, some early missteps and setbacks, including a spring 2009 White House event with Al Sharpton about which Goldstein reported DFER had funneled \$500,000 to a Sharpton-run nonprofit. A chagrined Williams admitted it was a mistake at the time and would later describe the episode with Sharpton as one of DFER’s worst moments.

16. Steven Brill, *Class Warfare: Inside the Fight to Fix America’s Schools* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 277.

17. While reform allies were busy with RTTT, the teachers unions and others won inclusion of the \$100 billion State Fiscal Stabilization Fund to prevent massive layoffs by districts.

18. Eventually, the teachers unions went after Duncan rather than criticizing Obama directly—a move that Williams would say made the NEA look “like the lunatic fringe” but also allowed teachers to vent their energy without offending the White House.

19. Begun in 2010 with the help of then-Mayor Booker, the effort to revamp Newark public schools with \$100 million in funding from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg ran into controversy and struggled with Booker’s sudden decision to run for higher office.

20. For Williams, the Boston mayor’s race was a particularly lamentable failure. “We went in big for John Connelly, and I wish we had done a little bit better.” (For others, the loss was unfortunate but irrelevant. “By end of campaign Walsh and Connelly were agreeing with each other on our issues,” said a former DFER staffer who didn’t want to be named.) The Jeffries loss in Newark wasn’t as bothersome, according to Williams. Funders wanted polling data to confirm that Jeffries could win. “It was really hard to raise money. Three or four more weeks, we could have done some damage.”

21. Although widely rumored, the New York state teachers didn’t recruit Zephyr Teachout to run against incumbent Andrew Cuomo, according to Wilson.

22. After leaving DFER, Williams ended up consulting for the Walton family, not the foundation.

23. DFER's Williams disputes that this ever happened, saying that his organization "never made a grant to AFC." Any funding that might have changed hands "would have been partnering on some ads or something like that."

24. Telephone interview.

25. Claudio Sanchez, "Teachers Feeling 'Beat Down' As School Starts," NPR, August 10, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/08/10/139392900/teachers-feeling-beat-down-as-school-year-starts>.

26. Sean Cavanaugh, "At Convention, Lawmakers Talk Peace, and War, with Unions," *Education Week*, September 4, 2012, http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2012/09/lawmakers_talk_of_peace_and_wa.html.

27. Andrew Ujifusa, "Leadership, Political Winds Buffet Education Advocacy Groups," *Education Week*, August 25, 2014, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/08/27/02studentfirst.h34.html>.

28. Alexander Russo, "Teachers Unions and the Common Core: Standards Inspire Collaboration and Dissent," *Education Next*, Winter 2015, <http://educationnext.org/teachers-unions-common-core/>.

29. Charles Barone, "Education Focus Needed to Help America's Working Families," RealClear Education, May 5, 2015, http://www.realcleareducation.com/articles/2015/05/05/education_focus_needed_to_help_americas_working_families_1194.html.

30. Kimberly Hefling, "Hillary Clinton Rebukes Charter Schools," Politico, November 9, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/11/hillary-clinton-charter-schools-education-215661>.

31. Jesse Ferguson, "Hillary Clinton Wades into the Internal Democratic Debate over Public Schools," *Washington Post*, November 11, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/hillary-clinton-wades-into-the-internal-democratic-battle-over-public-schools/2015/11/11/bde8766a-87e1-11e5-be8b-1ae2e4f50f76_story.html.

32. Joy Resmovits, "The New Face of Democrats Who Support Education Reform," *Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/local/education/community/la-me-edu-shavar-jeffries-takes-over-democrats-for-education-reform-20150902-story.html>.

33. By 2016, DFER wasn't the only education entity headed by a person of color. Others included TFA, New Leaders, the US Department of Education, and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative.

34. The Harlem Children's Zone, reformers' one late-2000s nod to students' broader needs, was quickly relegated to the back seat.

35. Editorial Board, "Guess Who's Taking Remedial Classes," *New York Times*, May 10, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/10/opinion/guess-whos-taking-remedial-classes.html>.

36. Justin Miller, "Hedging Education," *American Prospect*, May 6, 2016, <http://prospect.org/article/hedging-education-o>.